

ALIEN NATION

Gretchen Bender, Colette, Catharine Czudej, Tishan Hsu, Pope L., Helmut Lang, Peter Nagy, Kayode Ojo, Jade Kuriki Olivo (Puppies Puppies), Julia Scher, SoIL Thorton, WangShui

This exhibition emerged from the writings of the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter. Specifically, in thinking about her later work on the historical rise of humanism and that epistemological framework's *overrepresentation of "Man" as the human in general*. By this she is referring to the synecdochic confusion of humankind in all its manifestations with a specifically gendered and racialized individual—the attractive, straight, white, cisgender, able-bodied, productive, and happy men we associate with an inherited, almost inhuman evil. This conception of the human, as Wynter explains, tells its history through an imaginative mapping of the species in relation to something beyond itself, a storytelling reliant on something extrahumanly mandated that pre-exists and predetermines what exactly we are. For most of our history, societies were mapped in relation to the cosmos, the organization of culture following the extraterrestrial movement of the planets and stars. This exhibition proposes alienness, and the attendant alienation it produces, as foundational still to our contemporary conception of the human itself.

With the development and expansion of Christianity we were of course made in the image of God, a different kind of cosmological being. While God died with Darwin and we've since been desupernaturalized, there remains a narrative logic that attributes degrees of humanness along a progressive line. Since the Enlightenment, we've charted our history as something that is *evolving*: from nomadic, hunter-gatherer modes of existence to pasturage, to agriculture, and now, "finally," to a commercial-industrial, capitalist organization of society. It is the reason we continue to use words like "developed," "developing," and "underdeveloped," raising the question as to what exactly we are evolving towards. Wynter contends that this bio-evolutionary origin myth—the scientific belief that we are just a species among species—has normalized the liberal, and now neo-liberal, distribution of inequality and violence as something *natural*, as having to do with a culture or individual's evolutionary state along a eugenic schema. It is a secular-scientific surrogate for the "sinners and the saved" that can now be measured in strictly economic terms. It is no coincidence that the emergence of Renaissance humanism coincided with the beginnings of the colonization and dehumanization of much of the world, a reality that when acknowledged forces a recognition of the non-universality of the West's conception of the human, as its sovereignty is founded precariously and necessarily upon the very abjection of entire groups of people from it.

In the wake of WWII, a culmination of techno-humanism so blatantly at odds with itself that the West was left with no choice but to contend with its own inhumanity, the United Nations convened in 1948 to ratify the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Western scientists began to map the human genome. While these attempts to define the species in truly universal terms were well-intentioned, their loftiness stood in contrast to the contemporaneous upwelling of anti-colonial movements around the world that attempted to articulate indigeneity with a politicized specificity. By the fall of the Berlin Wall, the West's efforts at empathy, if not exactly

accountability, had already reached their parodic peak with the 1985 charity single *We Are the World*. As Hannah Arendt predicted in her 1955 book *Men in Dark Times*, “The solidarity of mankind may well turn out to be an unbearable burden, and it is not surprising that the common reactions to it are political apathy, isolationist nationalism, or desperate rebellion against all powers that be rather than enthusiasm or a desire for a revival of humanism.” As this burden only continues to intensify, perhaps it is helpful to reframe these questions entirely.

While the alien has been theorized by Afrofuturists, cyborg feminists, and queer post-humanists alike, there is a persistent trope of the human as something that is to be left behind. While the Big Bang may have been our narrative beginning, why are those who refuse, or are unable to be acculturated into, heterosexist and white supremacist Western bourgeois capitalism left with no alternative but to be abjected into space? Perhaps the fantasy of starting as settlers anew, off the planet, is really a way to escape contending with the horizon of humanity on the planet in truly ecumenical terms. As Judith Butler made clear with gender, Wynter proposes being human as performance, as praxis. This exhibition does not contend with the more difficult question posed by Wynter as to what a counter-humanism may look like, but rather merely wonders whether the human, as defined by “Western civilization’s globally and territorially incorporating planetary-imperializing world system,” is actually following an ideal rooted in the alien. Due to the impending catastrophe that is climate change, we are being forced to contend for the first time as a species with the costs of the homogenizing, transcultural, techno-automated, all-alienating, economically-valorized conception of the human that seems to define the Western and Westernized world. With the inheritors of the Age of Discovery developing their Space X and Blue Origin rockets, the obvious suddenly becomes clear: we in this country have been living in an alien nation for the last 250 years.

Avoiding overt figuration of the body almost entirely, this exhibition is not interested in redefining the human along identity-based lines, nor in referring to some culturally-derived nostalgia for the natural. Instead, it looks to artists who are investigating American cultural symbols and structures to reveal the ways alienation is internalized and how the inhumane mechanisms of our society are overlaid with human skin. SoIL Thorton’s painting compiles a list of top fifty US baby names, divided by sex, and collages them together to peculiar effects; meanwhile, Gretchen Bender’s small aluminum light box takes the title of a sci-fi blockbuster, now forgotten, and invests it with a spark of the divine. Colette’s lamp, a fragment from her *Living Environment* installation (1972-83), was once a beacon of bodily warmth in an interior insulated from the violence of the outside world, now forlorn, while Tishan Hsu explores the line between body and object as its blurred through ergonomic design. Arranging a constellation of mid-century glasses, fashionable relics from a time of American segregation, Pope L. then fills them to the brim with seltzer so that they overflow—they are at once metaphors for bodies of water crossed, the human body, or perhaps life-bearing planets whose atmospheres have past their prime.

As our reptilian leaders prepare themselves to leave our over-extracted world behind, our species’s soon-to-be-literalized alien-ation poses the question: Why frame our inhumanity in terms of the human at all?